



# SUPPORTING ONLINE LEARNERS

## Insights from SUNY's Campus Coaching Programs

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# OVERVIEW

With over half of college students taking at least one online course, and approximately 20 percent of public four-year college students and 32 percent of community college students engaging exclusively in online education in the fall 2022 semester, understanding how to effectively support online learners is critical. While research suggests that some forms of online learning do not have a negative impact on students, online learners still experience lower persistence rates compared with their in-person peers. This study examines how three institutions that are part of the State University of New York (SUNY) implemented success coaching programs to support online students' academic achievement and educational experiences.<sup>1</sup> The study included interviews with coaches, student focus groups, a student survey, and an analysis of institutional data regarding online and in-person students. Each institutional partner has a program that serves a different online student population, including a program for students in a fully online accounting degree program, a program for students enrolled in any online degree program, and last, a program for any student enrolled in an online course, regardless of their degree program.

Key findings show that while online students can achieve short-term academic outcomes comparable to those of their in-person peers, their institutional experiences may not include the same levels of support. High coach-to-student ratios and limited interactions with peers and faculty members all shape the experiences of online learners. When considering how to support online learners, institutions should identify a specific population, provide access to campus services, personalize communication, and promote community and engagement between students, coaches, and faculty members. Institutions should also ensure that coaching staff members have training and sufficient resources, such as access to appropriate technology and data, and that there are enough staff members to meaningfully engage with students. Finally, university systems seeking to develop institutional programming to support online learners should consider ways to ensure that campuses have sufficient resources to engage diverse learners, consistent ways to identify the student population, and the capacity to collect and analyze data about online learners.

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1. Using a holistic approach to coaching, the SUNY Online Degrees at Scale (DaS) coaching teams work on campuses to strengthen students' academic skills, behaviors, and beliefs and proactively provide critical campus and program information, resource referrals, and personalized support. State University of New York (2022).



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The Authors



# INTRODUCTION

Online learning has become a dominant force in higher education, with over half of college students taking at least one online course and approximately 20 percent of public four-year college students and 32 percent of community college students engaging exclusively in online education in the fall 2022 semester.<sup>1</sup> While research suggests that some forms of online learning do not have a negative impact on students, some studies have found that online learners still experience lower persistence rates compared with their in-person peers.<sup>2</sup> Considering the growing number of students who enroll in online learning courses and programs, there is a compelling need for research on how best to meet the academic, social, financial, and personal needs of online learners at colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> Extensive research shows that in-person learners benefit from additional forms of institutional support, such as holistic advising to help them navigate institutional policies and practices and financial support to help cover expenses, such as child care and tuition costs, that might become barriers to success.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, comparable research for online learners is lacking.

Consistent with nationwide trends, nearly one in three students at the State University of New York (SUNY), one of the country's largest university systems, is enrolled in online classes, either exclusively or partially.<sup>5</sup> SUNY Online, the central administrative hub and online environment for digital learning, spans across the system's 64 campuses.<sup>6</sup> In the fall of 2021, SUNY enrolled over 76,000 students exclusively in online courses, and over 190,000 students took at least one online course.<sup>7</sup> Within this context, MDRC conducted a mixed-methods exploratory evaluation examining support programs for students in online courses at three SUNY institutions located in rural settings (Alfred State College, Finger Lakes Community College, and State University of New York Plattsburgh).<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the evaluation was to better understand student participation in online coaching programs, differences in students' experiences and outcomes, and opportunities to improve future program growth and development. In collaboration with MDRC, SUNY System Administration aimed to learn about the individual programs through the following questions:

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1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2023).
  2. He et al. (2021); Hachey, Conway, Wladis, and Karim (2022); Smith Jaggars and Xu (2010); Xu and Smith Jaggars (2011a); Xu and Smith Jaggars (2011b).
  3. Berry (2022); Rovai (2003); Singh and Thurman (2019).
  4. Vasquez and Scrivener (2020); Fulcher Dawson, Kearney, and Sullivan (2020).
  5. State University of New York (2022).
  6. State University of New York (2024).
  7. State University of New York (2022).
  8. According to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), an exploratory evaluation is designed to examine the relationship between social programs or initiatives and their participants. Rather than assessing a program's efficacy or determining participant outcomes, these descriptive studies aim to identify logical connections and generate insights that could form the basis for future evaluations, interventions, programs, or strategies. The institutions in this study were chosen because their online support programs were more developed than other peer institutions.

- How do online coaching programs support online students' educational success?
- What tools and resources are used to support online students?
- What role do coaches serve in supporting online students' academic success (for example, as measured by grade point average [GPA])?
- What differences in outcomes and experiences exist among students attending three different colleges, each with its own coaching program?

## Key Findings

There are several findings related to how programs meet the needs of online learners and how online learners engage with coaches, faculty members, and college staff members, in addition to other student support resources.

- **Coaching model successes and limitations**— Each of the three institutions took a different approach to supporting online learners, but all provided their students with access to academic success resources and support, including proactive outreach and communication from student success coaches. Programs differed in the amount of personalized support given to students and the resources available to coaches. Last, participation in the coaching program was voluntary, and online learners may not have received sufficient information to encourage their engagement. A previous MDRC study found that voluntary programs yield lower student participation rates than compulsory coaching programs.<sup>9</sup>
- **Student engagement with coaches and peers**— Students at each institution had varied levels of engagement with coaches and peers. For students who used coaching support, these interactions contributed to a more positive overall experience. Students who did not use their institution's coaching program expressed a desire for more personalized communication, increased collaboration between coaches and faculty, and more community with their online peers.
- **Academic support and student outcomes**— Some students shared that coaching supported their academic experience, while others focused more on their interactions with faculty members in online courses and programs when discussing their academic experiences. Students also offered feedback on ways in which faculty members teaching online courses could offer more support and improve communication with students. Overall, online learners had similar academic outcomes, such as their GPAs, as their in-person peers.<sup>10</sup>

This report focuses on how institutions and systems can provide targeted support to online learners. It provides an overview of the SUNY system and campus online support programs, including a brief history of online support programs at SUNY. The following section highlights lessons learned from each campus partner, best practices, and areas for improvement. Last,

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9. Weiss et al. (2011).

10. MDRC calculations using data from the three participating colleges.

the report offers summary recommendations for institutions and systems seeking ways to support online learners.

## SUNY Online Degrees at Scale: System and Campus Programs

As the system’s home for digital learning, SUNY Online focuses on increasing access and persistence in postsecondary education, particularly for adult learners, that is, the segment of students enrolled in the program who are 25 years of age or older. SUNY Online aims to do so by supporting individual campus efforts for online students who, as shown in Box 1, are defined and identified in numerous ways. As shown in Figure 1, SUNY institutions offer over 36,000 online courses and 800 online programs across all 64 campuses.<sup>11</sup> SUNY Online also supported 25 Degrees at Scale (DaS) programs, which were specifically designed to serve both labor market needs and the unique needs of adult learners.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in 2019, students in DaS programs began receiving success coaching—holistic, comprehensive, ongoing, and dedicated help from staff members assigned to students as success coaches to support their academic progress—centrally through SUNY Online. Each of the three colleges discussed in this report had a DaS program.

### BOX 1

#### Defining Online Learners

“Online learners” can refer to students who (a) take all their courses exclusively online, (b) take some of their courses online, (c) take a single course online, or (d) take hybrid courses with both in-person and online learning components. The State University of New York does not have a single definition of which students qualify as “online learners” and each institution uses different classifications to define online learners.

### Centralized SUNY Online Coaching

From 2019 until 2023, students in DaS programs were supported by a team of SUNY Online success coaches managed by SUNY System Administration and dedicated to serving only online students. The program required coaches to support online students throughout their engagement with SUNY, by, for example, helping with applications and providing online orientation and program onboarding. Coaches used predictive analytics (informed by student data and the SUNY Online Student Success Inventory), early alert monitoring and interventions, referrals to campus resources, and proactive coaching outreach to support online learners.<sup>13</sup>

After the COVID-19 pandemic and due to a shift in organizational priorities and funding, this centrally administered program moved to a decentralized model in the spring semester of 2023. This change gave campuses the opportunity to tailor their approaches and implement programs that were responsive to the needs of specific student populations. To ensure a smooth transition, SUNY Online provided campuses with coaching and training

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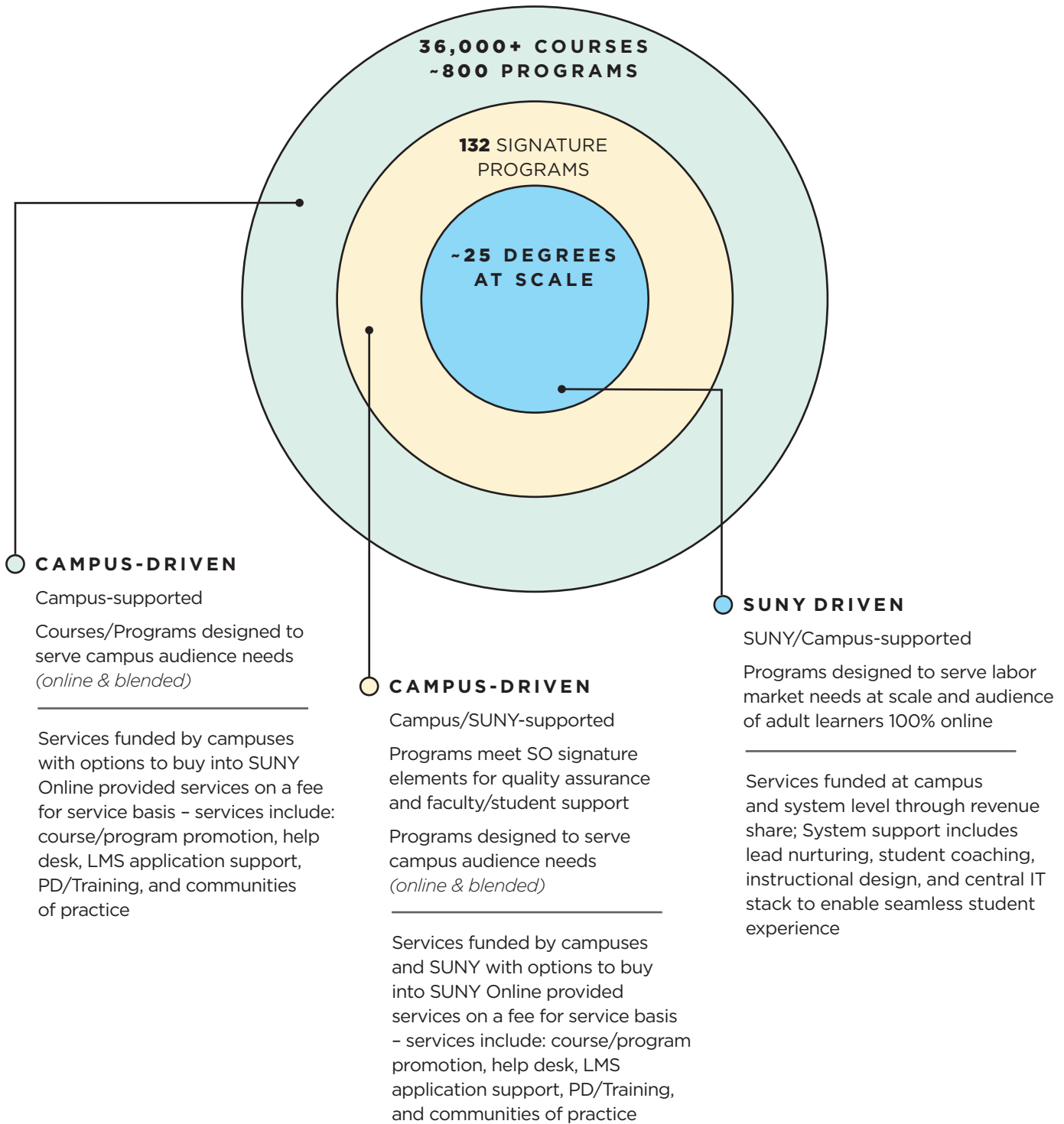
11. State University of New York (2022).

12. State University of New York (2022).

13. The SUNY Online Student Success Inventory is a resource available to assess incoming students’ self-reported readiness for online learning.

**Figure 1. SUNY Online Impact Report Overview**

**> OVERVIEW OF SUNY ONLINE**



SOURCE: State University of New York (2022).

NOTE: This figure is a slightly modified reproduction of the original presented in State University of New York (2022).

materials that were developed to specifically support online students. While campuses received ongoing support and guidance from SUNY System administrators, there was no expectation or requirement that campuses design or implement their coaching programs in the same manner as the original SUNY Online coaching program. Campus staff members were trained on the fundamentals of SUNY’s approach to online student success coaching. They were then given the flexibility to implement and tailor their programs to fit the needs of their students within the context of their campus-specific resources. Campuses were given the freedom to make decisions on staffing and which student populations to serve, among other features, such as coach titles. As it shifted to a decentralized model, SUNY System administrators sought to understand how institutions were carrying on the work of supporting online students through academic and success coaching.

### **Campus Programs**

Once the programs were the responsibility of individual institutions, campuses made decisions about whether to continue, modify, pause, or end their online student support programs. Alfred State College, Finger Lakes Community College, and SUNY Plattsburgh all chose to continue their programs and were selected to participate in this study because they had the most established online student support programs. While each program model is unique, they do share common design elements, including success coaches, early alert systems, resource reminders, and professional development for coaches.<sup>14</sup> While the programs share some similarities in their approaches to coaching and supporting online students, they also have differences that are specific to each institution. The following section elaborates on the three programs and the student populations they serve. Figure 2 provides summary information about each program.

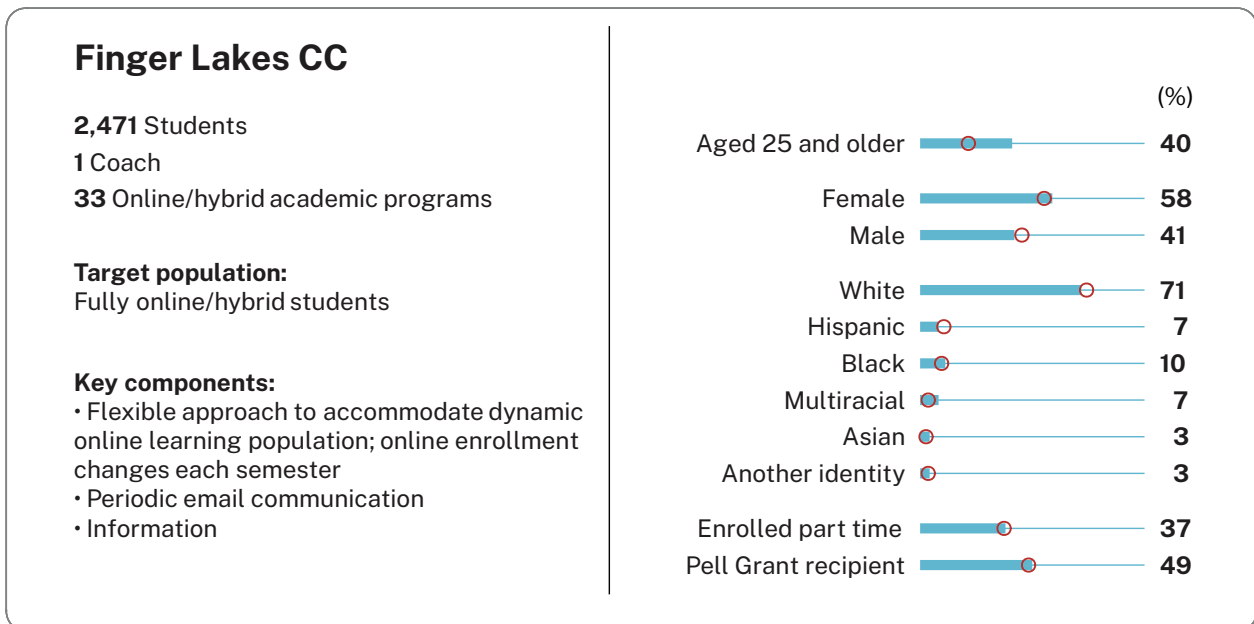
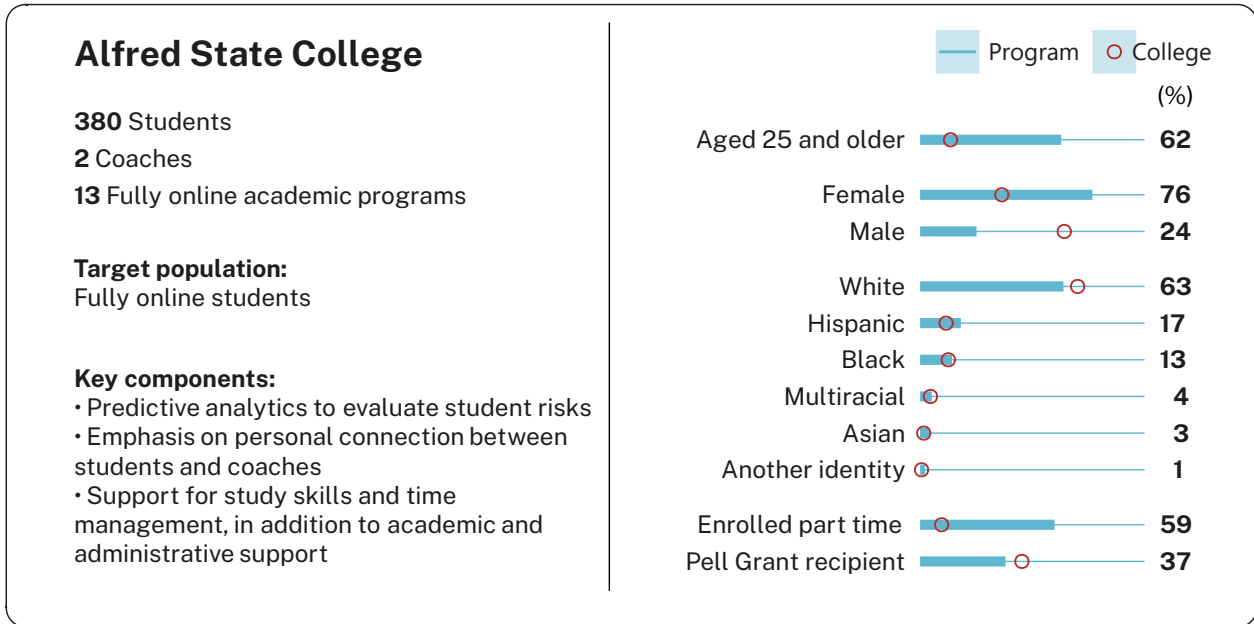
#### ***Alfred State College***

Alfred State College offers 13 fully online programs ranging from 15-credit certificate programs to 123-credit bachelor’s degree programs. The college’s online student support program is designed to provide comprehensive support to students enrolled in online programs, including help with course selection, registration, financial aid, and connecting with faculty members. The success coaching program emphasizes a personal connection between coaches and students. Through personalized interactions, coaches seek to provide structure for students while holding them accountable to their own educational plans.

The program serves a large number of part-time students; nearly 60 percent of the college’s students in online programs were enrolled part time, compared with only 9 percent of the general undergraduate degree-seeking population. The program also reaches a large share of students who only take online classes (nearly 90 percent), women, Hispanic students, and students over 25 years old compared with the general college population.<sup>15</sup>

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14. The term “early alert systems” refers to a functionality in higher education software that allows faculty to alert students and college support staff when students exhibit concerning behavior in their courses, such as poor performance in early quizzes, missed homework assignments, or have low course attendance rates.
  15. MDRC calculations using data from Alfred State College and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

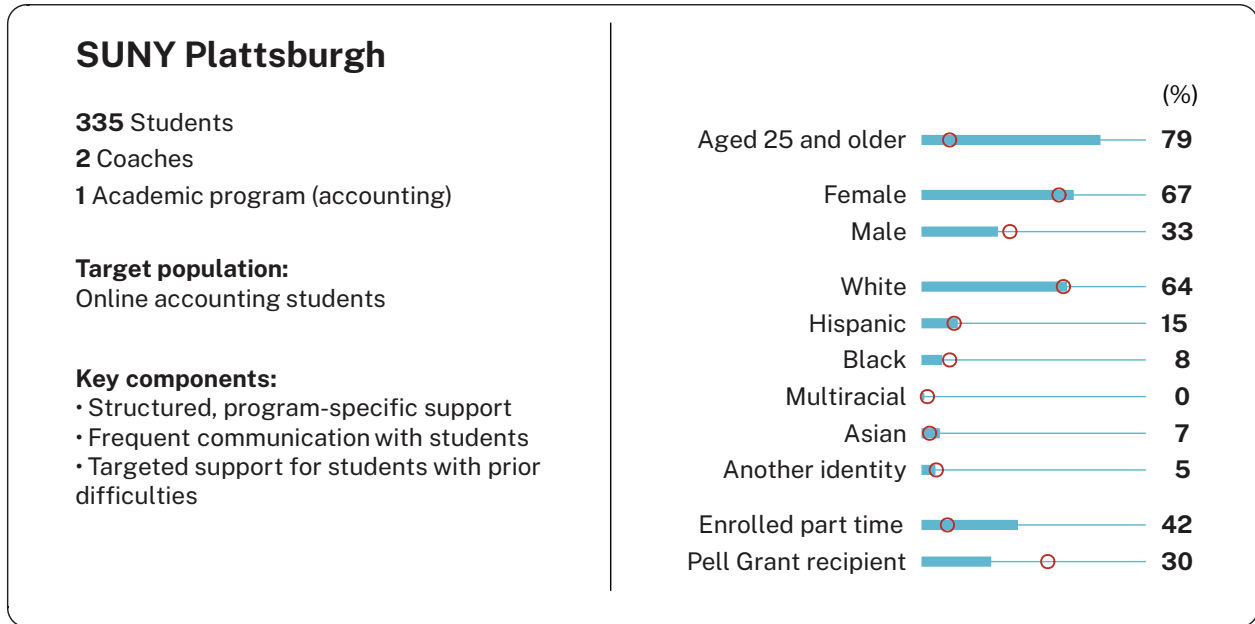
**Figure 2. Online Student Support Program Details**



(continued)



**Figure 2 (continued)**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on college data and data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

The category “Another identity” includes Native American or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern and North African, U.S. nonresident, and nonresponse.

**Finger Lakes Community College**

Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) offers 33 online certificate and associate’s degree programs. Of these, 21 programs are fully online. The remaining programs are hybrid courses, offering students the flexibility to take classes both online and in person. As a result, many students’ online status will fluctuate from one semester to the next. Due to the widespread participation of the student population in online courses, students are not expected to take courses exclusively online to be eligible for services through the program. Since the program is open to any student registered in an online or flex course in a given semester, a dedicated coach provides support to students, mainly through regular, substantive emails.<sup>16</sup>

The demographics of students who enroll in online and hybrid majors at FLCC resemble those of the general student population. Online and in-person students share similar demographic characteristics, although online students are more likely to be 25 years old or older. Furthermore, 37 percent of online and in-person students attend part time. In addition to being well positioned to reach students that are roughly representative of the student body in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, the program is available to support most degree-

16. According to Finger Lakes Community College (2024), students taking flex courses can choose to attend class in person, watch online in real-time, or watch the recorded lecture on their own time.

seeking students. In the fall 2022 semester, 87 percent of all degree-seeking students (2,844 students) were enrolled in an online or hybrid course (2,471 students).<sup>17</sup>

### **SUNY Plattsburgh**

The online coaching program at SUNY Plattsburgh exclusively targets students in the online accounting program. The coaching program is advertised as a factor that makes it different from other online accounting programs. Coaches provide proactive and regular support to students across a wide range of academic and nonacademic topics including financial aid, course selection, résumé or curriculum vitae review, and interview practice. They also provide regular updates to students throughout the year via email newsletters and serve as liaisons between accounting program students and other student support services.

Online accounting students are roughly reflective of Plattsburgh's general population in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Online students are notably more likely than their in-person peers to be 25 years old or older. Some 42 percent of students in the online accounting program are enrolled part time. By comparison, only 11 percent of degree-seeking students at the college are enrolled part time.

## **STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS**

To investigate each campus program and further understand students' experiences, MDRC used a mixed-methods approach. The research team interviewed six directors and coaches and 18 students (through interviews and focus groups), administered a student experience survey, and analyzed institutional student-level data at each campus. Two staff members (directors, success coaches, or both) from each college participated in interviews that covered coaches' experiences with program implementation. All students eligible for support through each campus program were invited to participate in focus groups whether or not they had met with a coach; therefore, the full population of students eligible for coaching at each campus was recruited to participate. The survey was modeled after the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and included questions about experiences with online learning, academic advising, and overall engagement.<sup>18</sup> Colleges administered the survey over Qualtrics to a total of about 2,830 program-eligible students across the three sites. The overall response rate was 13 percent, ranging from 11 percent to 36 percent at each site. Statistically, respondents' answers are unlikely to be representative of the experiences of all students who were invited to participate in the survey. The research team also collected institutional aggregate student data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and data on program-eligible students from the colleges. Since each program functions differently and seeks to serve different populations, this research does not make comparisons between institutions.

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17. MDRC calculations using data from FLCC and IPEDS.

18. Center for Postsecondary Research (2024).

Last, it is important to note that the centralized SUNY DaS coaching program had more resources, infrastructure, and support than the current versions of the campus programs. In addition, campuses were not expected to replicate the original coaching program; instead, they used components of the centralized SUNY DaS coaching program, along with SUNY standards for supporting online learners, and best practices in the field to develop and implement their own programs. While findings from this study should be understood within the specific institutional context of each program, lessons learned can be generalized to a broader context.

## FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews, focus group discussions, survey responses, and institutional data revealed three key categories of online student support at SUNY institutions: (1) coaching approaches including communication strategies and the use of technology, (2) student engagement, and (3) academic outcomes. Each category offers important insights for institutions seeking to develop or enhance online student support programs.

**Coaching approaches varied across institutions. They combined proactive outreach with flexible support, used different communication strategies and technological solutions, and had similar perspectives regarding success coaching—providing students with responsive, holistic advising practices.<sup>19</sup> However, once implemented, the programs had different levels of personalized support, areas of focus, and resources available to coaches and students.**

### Implementation of Coaching Models

Each of the three SUNY institutions developed unique coaching approaches tailored to their specific contexts and student populations. Alfred State implemented an intensive model with two coaches serving 380 students through weekly contact informed by predictive analytics. The level of communication is based on a student's assessed risk level, with coaches discussing student progress toward goals or checking in on overall student well-being over video or telephone calls, or text messages. In contrast, FLCC adopted a broader approach, with one coach providing flexible, as-needed assistance to over 2,400 students. The FLCC coach encourages students to meet at the beginning of the semester and typically provides reassurance, academic planning, and referrals to campus resources over telephone or video calls. SUNY Plattsburgh coaches focus on the online accounting program, where two dedicated coaches provide comprehensive, major-specific support to 335 students. The two success coaches and students' academic advisers comprise the Success Team. They reach out weekly to share important academic calendar event reminders, resource reminders, and invitations to participate in virtual events hosted by accounting department faculty members. Most students use email as their preferred method of communication because they are generally working

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19. Vasquez and Scrivener (2020).

professionals with busy schedules. While meetings are not required, they are available via Zoom for students whenever they need additional support.

Each program communicates with students about coaching support as well as other resources on campus. For example, at the beginning of the semester, coaches at SUNY Plattsburg use an intake survey to determine which students should have an initial holistic check-in meeting. Coaches do not require students to meet, but host group check-ins throughout the semester for students to talk about their experiences and provide feedback on the coaching support. One coach said,

[T]hroughout the semester, we'll have check-ins with students that are opportunities for students to kind of gather together and kind of air out things that they're experiencing, if there's any feedback for us...if they feel like there's something missing, we can address [these issues and] try to make sure that there are open channels of communication because I think with online students, it is so easy to feel super-isolated.

Coaches at all three campuses highlighted their role as a clearinghouse for information regarding academic, administrative, educational, and student support services (for example, financial aid, tutoring and writing support, and assistance mapping degree plans). Although structures differed, one of the key coaching approaches was to provide information through various means, such as email and digital communication platforms, to ensure that online learners who may not have access to in-person campus resources have the information necessary to navigate their academic careers successfully. For example, SUNY Plattsburgh coaches share a regular online newsletter with their accounting students to provide information in a consistent and easily accessible format.

### **Communication Strategies**

Programs employed multiple communication approaches, from automated alerts to personalized outreach. Numerous student participants enrolled at SUNY Plattsburgh shared their positive experiences with the college website—they found the interface easy to navigate, and the college's student supports were shown immediately at the top of the web page. One student shared that Plattsburgh's online accounting program was easy to research and the student was quickly able to contact the program adviser to learn more about applying. Student feedback highlighted a clear preference for personalized communication. As one online student explained, "[t]hose weekly updates definitely help...when they basically give you advice on what you can do the next week and tell you how proud they are of your progress...that definitely gives students that boost that they need." This sentiment was echoed across focus groups, suggesting that while automated messages may be efficient, personal connection and recognition are important for meaningful student engagement.

## Coaching Tools and Technology

Each institution uses various tools to support students, such as

- Learning management systems (such as Brightspace and Starfish) for course delivery and coaching interactions<sup>20</sup>
- Early alert systems to identify struggling students
- Analyses of students' data (for example, grades, course attendance, and credit accumulation) to guide intervention strategies

Online success coaches often use student data and software to provide proactive student advising. SUNY Plattsburgh's online accounting program demonstrates particularly effective use of technology. Coaches use education technology platforms like Starfish to track student progress and facilitate communication between faculty and coaches. They also strategically time and tailor communications based on their student population's preferences, recognizing that their "business-minded" students appreciate direct, relevant information. Plattsburgh student survey responses underscore the importance of user-friendly education technology, which can entail learning management systems or other digital applications (such as Teams) to engage students. Plattsburgh students have relatively high levels of satisfaction with their institution's advising system and other online resources and publications. Over 70 percent of Plattsburgh survey respondents report that the online advising system helped them develop their academic goals and future plans, "A great deal" or "A lot."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, about 95 percent of Plattsburgh survey respondents "Agreed" or "Strongly Agreed" with the statement, "The online course platform or learning management system has been user-friendly." (See Appendix Tables A.7 and A.13 for average survey responses across the three colleges.) Elements such as their college's website interface are of heightened significance to this student population.

**Best practices:** There are several practical techniques and tools coaches use to support online learners' unique needs. The first is to tailor support levels and approaches based on individual student needs. Working collaboratively with other departments, such as the advising office, or with relevant faculty members, also allows coaches to modify their approach. In addition, providing comprehensive support to address nonacademic challenges helps coaches fill a specific role for online learners that supports their overall well-being. Maintaining regular, proactive communication with students is critical to making connections, particularly for students who may never go to the campus or have any in-person interactions with faculty and staff members.

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20. A "learning management system" is a software application that helps create, deliver, and track educational courses, training programs, and student information.

21. As mentioned earlier, only 11 percent to 36 percent of students that were invited to participate in the survey responded, depending on the institution. The experiences of the students who chose to participate may not be representative of all students who are eligible for online success coaching supports.

**Areas for improvement:** Reducing coach-to-student ratios is one area for improvement. Coaches are limited in their ability to provide proactive and personalized support due to the number of students they must serve. Increasing professional development opportunities and resources can also support coaches and help refine programs' approaches to working with online learners. Programs should limit automated and impersonal messages, and instead develop clear communication protocols and enhance the personalization of communication and outreach efforts.

**Student engagement was a consistent challenge for each of the programs, as evidenced by gaps between available services and student awareness and utilization of those services. In addition to highlighting cases of disconnect between students and coaches, students in focus groups expressed the desire for increased interaction and connection with peers.**

### **Program Awareness and Accessibility**

A significant challenge across all three SUNY institutions involved bridging the gap between available support services and student engagement with those services. While survey data showed that most students (almost 60 percent) knew how to contact their coach (see Appendix Table A.1), many never took advantage of this support. In fact, 43 percent of survey respondents considered coaching services “not applicable” to them (see Appendix Table A.2), suggesting a disconnect between how services were marketed and how students perceived their relevance. However, for programs that were voluntary and did not require students to connect with their coaches, it is a positive sign that a majority of students demonstrated an understanding of their institution's coaching support. In addition, coaches shared numerous efforts to address this gap in knowledge,

The email is kind of the standard form of communication. If we either don't hear from students or are trying to push out information that we think is super important, then we will use a text message.... Text seems to be the sweet spot of they're getting the information that they need or ... responses back that we're looking for.

Survey respondents reported that people and resources at their institution (not limited to coaches) have “been available when needed” from “a moderate amount” to “a great deal,” on average 54 percent of the time (see Appendix Table A.3). This percentage suggests room for improvement in the accessibility of support services, very broadly. It also offers helpful context in understanding students' perceptions of the quality of their interactions with coaches at their school.

### **Students' Perceptions of Coaching Effectiveness**

Students' perceptions of coaching and its effectiveness or usefulness in supporting their academic success and educational experience overall vary. Some 64 percent of student survey responses indicate that coaches provided a moderate amount to a great deal of “support to help [them] succeed academically” (see Appendix Table A.4). Roughly half of survey respondents (52 percent) also indicated that coaches helped them “develop [their] academic goals and future plans” at least a moderate amount. Keeping in mind that not

all survey respondents connected with their coaches, it is unclear whether the share of students who felt that their coach helped them with their academic goals would be higher among those who used coaching services often. The focus group findings suggest it would be; focus group participants who used coaching services frequently shared a clear sense of gratitude and appreciation for their coaches. They reported that coaches provided a reliable point of contact to obtain information and support for navigating the campus system.

Demonstrating a culture of care emerged from interviews with coaches and student focus groups as a critical element of successful online coaching programs. This approach, which prioritizes student well-being alongside academic success, includes individualized support and case management-style coaching. Students particularly valued receiving comprehensive guidance, including academic advising, skill-building assistance, and emotional encouragement. Survey data align with the focus group and interview findings, with close to 68 percent of respondents reporting that their coaches provided at least some support for their overall well-being and almost 62 percent reporting that they received help with managing nonacademic responsibilities (see Appendix Table A.4). One student noted, “[My coach] helped me with everything. She helped me find housing, helped me get to school when I couldn’t make it...I mean, she was really there for me.” This holistic approach to student support increased both engagement with coaching services and overall satisfaction with the online learning experience.

### **Perceptions of Campus Connections**

A notable tension emerged between how coaches and students viewed the importance of community in online learning. Students repeatedly expressed in the focus groups that, as online learners, they were more “independent” than their peers. Coaches also characterized online students as independent learners who primarily needed academic and career planning support rather than social connection. One coach noted, “These students aren’t really looking for the touchy-feely stuff.” However, student feedback during focus groups complicated this characterization. Many expressed a desire for greater connection with both peers and the institution. “I feel so disconnected with school,” shared one student. “If someone just reached out to say ‘Hey, you’re okay, do you need help?’ I think it would really help me connect with somebody.” Survey data reflected this complexity—while only 36 percent of respondents said increasing student-to-student interaction was “important” or “very important” (see Appendix Table A.5), 34 percent reported that these connections significantly helped their academic development (see Appendix Table A.6).

SUNY Plattsburgh’s online accounting program offers an instructive example of fostering meaningful engagement. With the support and guidance of coaches, students in this program created their own online social organization using Discord, a digital platform that lets users communicate via text and chat functions. It became a vibrant space for sharing advice about courses, discussing program requirements, and building community. One student described it as “SUNY Plattsburgh’s first online club ... for all of us to be able to participate and talk with each other, create a community for ourselves as being online students.” This student-led initiative demonstrated that online learners value community connection when it’s relevant to their academic goals and easily accessible through familiar digital platforms.

**Best Practices:** Programs were able to encourage student participation when there was a clear marketing of the coaching services that emphasized their relevance to academic success. It is also important to offer multiple channels for student engagement that respect varying preferences for interaction (for example, social media and web communication platforms). Another promising practice for institutions is to engage with students as partners in sharing information about the program as well as collaboratively creating opportunities to build community. Demonstrating a culture of care that prioritizes student well-being and success can help promote student engagement. Last, regular, personalized outreach from coaches was one factor students across the programs discussed as encouraging them to make use of the coaching program and resources.

**Areas for Improvement:** To increase student engagement and enhance a sense of belonging, institutions should consider developing more targeted and systematic outreach strategies that clearly communicate the value of their support services. While email is a useful tool for disseminating information to large groups, it is of limited use when trying to promote meaningful connection or engagement with students. Programs targeting online learners should also create opportunities for peer connection that align with academic and personal goals and provide a chance to build community. Another strategy to increase coaching service availability and accessibility is to expand staffing.

**Students' academic outcomes were comparable to those of their in-person peers. Academic support and online students' outcomes were influenced by coaches as well as faculty members. Some students sought coaching to support their academic engagement, while others focused more on their interactions with faculty members and their curricular on-line experience.**

### **Academic Performance**

One of the key takeaways from this research is that “online student” is not a fixed characteristic. It is common for students to take a mix of online and in-person courses over their academic careers. As a result, apples-to-apples comparisons between online and in-person students over time are difficult to construct. For this reason, the research team examined students' GPAs within the same semester (as opposed to longer-term measures such as retention or persistence). Online students demonstrated academic success comparable to their in-person peers. As shown in Figure 3, online students across all three institutions achieved similar rates of earning a 2.0 GPA or higher compared with in-person students at their institutions in fall 2023.<sup>22</sup>

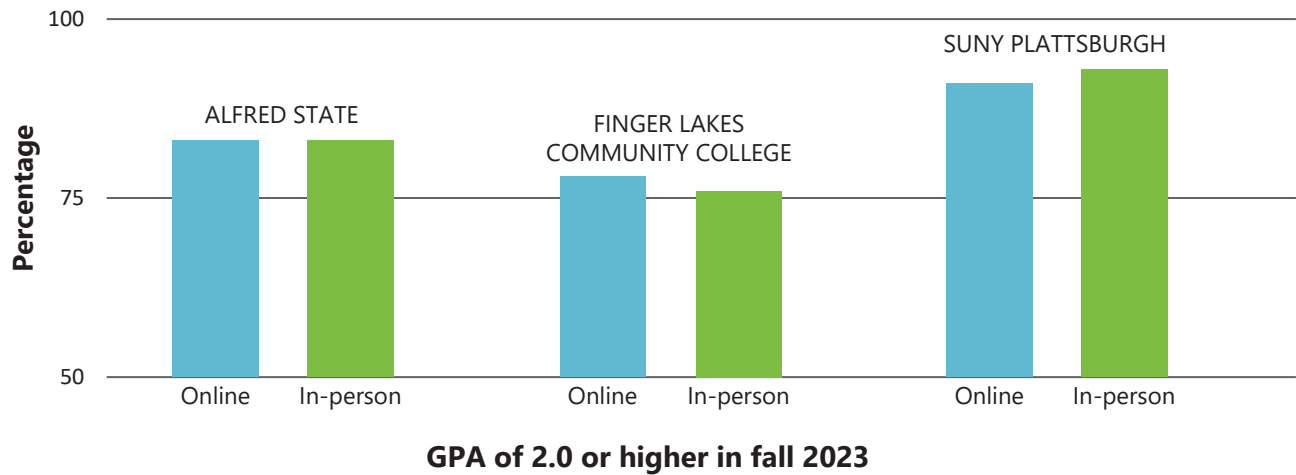
On average, students at the three participating colleges met or exceeded national averages for community college students. The National Center for Education Statistics' Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study finds that roughly 75 percent of Pell-eligible and 79 percent of Pell-ineligible first-year community college students earned a GPA of

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22. The 2.0 GPA measure is meaningful because it corresponds to the common Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) threshold that students must meet to remain eligible for the Pell Grant program.



**Figure 3. Comparable GPAs for Online and In-Person Students**



SOURCES: Descriptive statistics provided by study colleges.

2.0 or higher in 2012 (more recent data have not yet been released).<sup>23</sup> However, while this early indicator of academic success is promising, further research on how to support online students' longer-term academic success is needed. Such research will benefit from careful consideration of how and why online learners' course modality fluctuates, as well as other changeable factors that influence student success. For example, online students in this study were generally more likely to enroll part time, which is negatively correlated with retention rates over the long term.

### **Online Learning Experience**

Survey respondents shared generally positive experiences with online learning, with 79 percent rating their experience as “Excellent” or “Good” (see Appendix Table A.7). Survey respondents reported that the majority of courses they took (60 percent to 90 percent, depending on the college) were delivered asynchronously (that is, not at the same time as instructors or other learners—see Appendix Table A.8 for the averages across all three colleges), though more than half of all respondents reported having some opportunities for peer interaction through small groups or breakout rooms (see Appendix Table A.9). Notably, 95 percent of survey respondents indicated receiving some personalized feedback and guidance from instructors.

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23. Schudde and Scott-Clayton (2014).

## Course Design and Faculty Engagement and Support

Despite the overall satisfaction reflected in the survey data, the qualitative data identified significant variation in course quality and faculty engagement. When discussing the benefits and challenges of online learning, student focus group participants frequently discussed the flexibility and availability of courses. However, a fundamental challenge emerged around course design and delivery. As one Plattsburgh staff member observed, “There are faculty members who think teaching online is going to be easy. They take their in-person course and just dump it into Brightspace.... There is no accountability for poorly designed courses.” Students particularly struggled with inconsistent course structures, variable quality of instructional materials, delayed communication with faculty members, limited engagement with instructors or peers, unclear expectations, and rigid policies that did not account for online learners’ needs.

While 79 percent of survey respondents reported feeling comfortable seeking guidance from faculty members (see Appendix Table A.10), the asynchronous nature of many courses created barriers to timely support. Students valued flexibility but emphasized the need for regular faculty engagement. The most successful courses combined clear structure with consistent faculty member presence and responsive communication. One student said,

[I]t was just the one professor ... but it felt like he kind of neglected his online class. Because I talked to one of my friends who had the same professor in person and he, like, loved [the professor]. [My friend said] he was super helpful.... But I had him online and some of the stuff wasn’t up to date or we’d have to ask him questions and he changed the material to correct it and it would take him a while to respond.... There was one class I just didn’t have a good experience in, but it was just because of the professor.

**Best Practices:** There were several successful academic support strategies highlighted through this section. The integration of coaching support with specific academic programs is one way that coaches can provide personalized support for their students (for example, SUNY Plattsburgh’s online accounting program). Coordination between faculty members and coaches can provide more holistic support for students across academic programs (as in the case of Alfred State).

**Areas for Improvement:** As institutions reflect on ways to do more for online learners, one area of focus could be on course design and targeted professional development for faculty members. Institutions should continue to invest in standardized course templates across departments, particularly for faculty members who are less experienced at teaching online. This investment could be accompanied by comprehensive faculty training for online instruction and regular course quality reviews for consistency and quality improvements. Institutions can also promote flexible policies that accommodate online learners. Continuing to improve communication among students, faculty members, and coaches can also promote an integrated approach to support services. Early alert systems are one tool that can facilitate communication and collaboration between faculty and coaches. These efforts can include establishing better integration between academic and support services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While the experiences of coaches and students in each program varied, common successes and challenges offer several key areas to focus on for future practice and research. Each coaching program used limited resources and technology to connect and communicate with students who voluntarily chose to use coaching services. Frequency and modes of communication differed at each site, although all coaches used proactive outreach to engage students and convey important information. Students' engagement and experiences with coaches varied, but those who used the available resources reported having a positive experience working with coaches. Students stressed the importance of faculty member interactions to their continued engagement and success in online courses. Although experiences with programs differed, on average, students had outcomes that were comparable to those of their in-person peers. The shift to a decentralized success coaching model allows institutions to tailor support to specific student populations. However, limited resources and the voluntary nature of these programs may hinder coaches' ability to connect with students. The following recommendations offer strategies, ideally working in parallel, that institutions can implement to enhance online student success.

### Develop Comprehensive Coaching Models

Institutions should invest in robust coaching programs that balance structure with flexibility to increase the number of students benefiting from more interaction with coaches. These benefits can include improved retention rates and academic performance of online learners. Students in the study did not engage fully with coaches and, due to large caseloads, coaches are limited in their ability to follow up with and provide individualized support to every eligible student. These recommendations can strengthen existing practices while improving program elements that have contributed to student success in other coaching models.

- **Reduce coach-to-student ratios to enable more personalized support.** Institutions can consider limiting caseloads to a maximum of 200-300 students per coach and should make hiring additional coaches a priority over expanding automated services. Doing so would help ensure coaches have time for proactive outreach and would allow them to provide more personalized and holistic support to online learners.
- **Implement data-informed coaching practices.** Predictive analytics and other institutional data could be used to identify students who may need additional support early in their academic programs, enabling coaches to tailor their support to individual students further.
- **Track student engagement patterns to guide intervention strategies.** By tracking and documenting coaches' engagement with students, institutions can be better equipped to assess the effectiveness of different outreach methods and the connections between coaching supports and academic outcomes.

- **Provide ongoing professional development for coaches.** As institutions begin to develop supports specifically for online learners, training coaches in online student engagement strategies would be helpful. Additional efforts can also help coaches develop clear protocols for virtual support delivery.

## Improve Online Learners' Engagement

Online learners still need and desire connection and support from their institutions. By improving communication, outreach, and opportunities to connect with coaches and peers, students may experience academic success and a greater sense of belonging, which has also been linked to improved educational outcomes. Increasing formal and personalized communications between coaches and students, offering numerous flexible methods for students to meet with coaches, and creating opportunities for students to meet with their peers all hold promise for encouraging student engagement. In order to have a greater influence on students' success, institutions must make student support services plainly visible and accessible to online learners.

- **Streamline access to support services.** Programs and institutions should aim to create single points of entry for accessing different types of support that are specific to online learners. This would limit confusion for students and increase the likelihood that they learn about available resources.
- **Enhance marketing and communication strategies.** Programs can take numerous steps to improve communication with students beyond email, such as with text messages or messaging through learning management systems. In addition, establishing consistent response times and templates for sharing information can improve students' perspectives on these programs. While email was the most common form of communication, students, particularly those in fully online or asynchronous programs, may miss important information if emails are the only form of communication.
- **Personalize communication based on students' needs and preferences.** Although some students prefer less communication from coaches, other students may need or require more support. Personalizing the approach to communication can also help coaches save time by identifying specific student needs and providing relevant information about resources and support.
- **Foster online students' sense of community and belonging.** Institutions should create opportunities for meaningful connections between online learners and their coaches and peers. Programs can lean into online learners' independent and flexible nature by encouraging and providing resources for students to build their own communities. This can include facilitated synchronous and asynchronous student-led study groups, virtual spaces for peer interaction, program-specific student organizations, or connections through academic programs.

## Improve Academic Support and Collaboration Between Coaches and Faculty Members in Online Courses

Teaching practices, curriculum, and pedagogy were raised as significant areas of concern for online learners. Students' perceptions of an institution are often informed by their interactions with faculty, even more so within an online curricular context. Therefore, promoting training and development specifically for faculty members who teach online courses can enhance students' academic experiences and contribute to other positive outcomes. Students made note of both supportive and unsupportive teaching practices in online courses and illuminated potential areas of improvement regarding faculty members and course curriculum and modality.

- **Build more robust connections between academic and support services.** Integrating coaching support with specific academic programs can contribute to a more personalized and meaningful coaching experience for some students. This approach could also help to create regular communication channels between faculty members and coaches.
- **Establish clear standards for online course design and quality review.** These practices can include creating standardized course templates or defining minimum requirements for student-faculty member interaction. If institutions developed standards of practice for those teaching online courses, faculty members who may be new to the environment could be better supported, and students may have improved learning experiences.
- **Provide comprehensive faculty member training.** Institutions should invest in offering ongoing professional development in online pedagogy for all faculty members teaching online courses. One approach could be to create incentives for faculty members to enhance online courses. Another can include sharing best practices across departments.

## Increase System Support for Institutional Programs for Online Learners

Postsecondary education systems, such as SUNY, can support institutions in their efforts to help online learners through additional resources. Investing resources in a more standardized and structured program may help institutions and coaches to provide more targeted support to online learners. Finally, systems seeking to develop institutional programming to support online learners should consider ways to ensure campuses have access to data about online learners.

- **Continue providing ongoing staff member training and development support** to help coaches implement specific strategies to support online learners.
- **Provide additional resources, such as funding or access to data and technology,** that can help streamline engagement with online learners across system and campus levels.

- **Encourage institutional data collection and analysis of online learners' experiences and academic outcomes** to provide coaches with more actionable information about the student populations they serve.

## CONCLUSION

This study of three SUNY institutions' approaches to supporting online learners reveals both promising practices and ongoing challenges in implementing effective coaching programs. The research aims to understand how coaching programs supported student success, what differences existed in outcomes and experiences, and how coaches promoted academic achievement. Key findings demonstrate that while online students can achieve short-term academic outcomes comparable to those of their in-person peers, their institutional experiences may not include the same levels of support. High coach-to-student ratios and limited interactions with peers and faculty members all shape the experiences of online learners. When considering how to support online learners, institutions should identify a specific population, provide access to available services, personalize communication, and promote community and engagement between students, coaches, and faculty members. Institutions should also ensure that coaching staff members have training and sufficient resources, such as access to appropriate technology and data, and that there are enough staff members to meaningfully engage with students. Finally, university systems seeking to develop institutional programming to support online learners should consider ways to ensure campuses have sufficient resources to engage diverse learners, consistent ways to identify the student population, and the capacity to collect and analyze data about online learners.

As online education continues to grow, institutions must develop more systematic approaches to supporting online learners. Success requires sustained commitment to both program development and evaluation, ensuring that support services evolve to meet changing student needs while maintaining focus on educational quality and student success.

## APPENDIX

# A

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## Survey Response Data





### Appendix Table A.1. Contacting the Success Coach

Outcome (%)	Yes	No
Do you know how to contact your success coach/success team?	59	41

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

One college referred to its “success team” rather than “coach” to reflect the nature of its program.

### Appendix Table A.2. Quality of Interactions

Outcome (%)	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Not Applicable
Students	26	37	13	5	19
Academic advisers	53	30	11	3	3
Success coaches	22	20	9	5	43
Faculty members	39	42	10	2	7
Student services staff members	29	28	6	5	32
Other administrative staff members	39	41	10	2	8

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.3. How Much Have People and Resources at Your Institution Done the Following?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>A great deal</b>	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A moderate amount</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
Been available when needed	21	16	17	5	7	35
Provided prompt and accurate information	25	15	16	5	6	33
Provided information about learning support services	18	15	16	7	7	37
Notified you of important policies and deadlines	25	13	15	7	9	31
Reached out to you about your academic progress or performance	16	9	20	10	14	31
Followed up with you regarding something they recommended	18	10	16	8	11	38
Asked questions about your educational background and needs	15	8	17	10	15	34
Actively listened to your concerns	22	12	16	5	8	37
Respected your identities and cultures	27	10	12	2	6	43
Cared about your overall well-being	23	13	17	3	7	37

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.4. How Much Does Your Coach Emphasize the Following?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>A great deal</b>	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A moderate amount</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work	11	19	35	12	23
Providing support to help you succeed academically	10	21	33	13	23
Using learning support services	8	19	28	15	30
Providing support for your overall well-being	8	15	27	19	32
Helping you manage your nonacademic responsibilities	6	12	24	19	38

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.5. To Improve the Online Course-Taking Experience,  
How Important Is It That Your Institution Do the Following?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>Very important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Increase interactions between students	17	18	34	25	5
Increase interactions with instructors	31	36	22	6	5
Improve responsiveness of instructors	37	31	20	7	5
Improve online tools for student collaboration	28	31	25	10	5
Provide more online learning support services	29	29	29	9	5

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.6. How Much Have Each of the Following Helped You Develop Your Academic Goals and Future Plans?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>A great deal</b>	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A moderate amount</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
Academic adviser, faculty, or staff member assigned to advise you	35	19	23	11	9	4
Academic adviser(s) available to any student	29	20	19	8	10	13
Faculty or instructor(s) not assigned to advise you	18	15	19	10	20	19
Online advising system	31	18	19	11	12	9
Website, catalog, or other published source	26	19	18	12	13	12
Student services staff	16	10	21	11	20	22
Success or academic coach	16	11	14	12	24	23
Peer advisor or mentor	13	10	13	8	24	32
Friends or other students	22	12	20	11	14	20
Family members	31	17	17	13	11	12
Other	9	3	6	1	17	65

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.7. How Would You Evaluate Your Online Learning Experience?**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Excellent	35
Good	44
Fair	12
Poor	3
Missing	6
Sample size	354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.8. How Have Your Online Courses Typically Been Scheduled?**

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Synchronous	4
Asynchronous	72
A mix of synchronous and asynchronous	14
Hybrid	5
Missing	6
Sample size	354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.9. How Many of Your Online Courses Included the Following?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Most</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>None</b>
Live sessions including the instructor and students	4	8	28	60
Prerecorded presentations by the instructor	18	27	46	9
Presentations or talks by experts in the field	4	16	43	36
Group projects or presentations	3	11	39	47
Interaction among students in small groups or breakout rooms	7	14	33	47
Frequent quizzes or short assignments to check understanding	36	34	21	3
Coursework that challenges you to enhance your knowledge, skills, and abilities	45	37	15	4
Instructional materials that represent diverse perspectives and people	37	34	24	5
Opportunities for personalized feedback, support, and guidance from the instructor	35	33	27	5
Opportunities to apply your learning to a real-world problem or issue	28	28	35	9
Statements related to protection of your privacy and data	34	21	26	18

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.10. How Comfortable Have You Been Doing the Following in Your Online Courses?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>Extremely comfortable</b>	<b>Moderately comfortable</b>	<b>Slightly comfortable</b>	<b>Not at all comfortable</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Participating in online discussion boards, forums, or other discussion tools	52	29	8	3	3	5
Participating in live course discussions	24	18	11	6	36	5
Taking proctored online exams	34	21	7	5	27	5
Interacting with other students in the course	40	30	13	3	9	5
Interacting with your instructor to discuss course topics, ideas, or concepts	51	26	11	3	5	5
Using learning support services	29	21	11	7	27	5
Seeking feedback and guidance from your instructor	52	27	8	4	4	5

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.



**Appendix Table A.11. How Often Did Someone at Your Institution Discuss the Following with You?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>Very often</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>
Your academic goals and future plans	7	18	30	10	35
How your major or expected major relates to your goals and future plans	8	21	25	11	35
Special opportunities	5	14	24	12	45
Resources for your well-being	6	17	27	12	38

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.12. To What Extent Have Your Online Courses Provided the Following?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>A great deal</b>	<b>A lot</b>	<b>A moderate deal</b>	<b>A little</b>	<b>Not at all</b>
Clearly stated learning objectives or goals	33	36	22	7	2
Clear guidance about how to get started in the course	33	37	17	10	3
A clearly stated grading policy	40	37	14	6	3
Course information and activities that are easy to locate	33	34	24	5	3
Sufficient instructions for using course-related technology	32	33	23	8	4
Clarity about when instructors would respond to you	32	32	23	8	4
Clear expectations for your interactions with other students	33	32	22	8	5
Assessments that help you achieve course learning objectives or goals	36	37	19	6	3
Instructional materials that help you achieve course learning objectives or goals	37	33	21	7	2

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.13. Considering Your Experience Taking Online Courses, to What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statements?**

<b>Outcome (%)</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Missing</b>
Internet service where you live has been sufficient to participate in the course	53	37	4	1	6
The hardware and software that you have access to have been sufficient to participate in the course	52	36	5	1	6
I engage with my online courses more on my phone than I do on my personal computer	12	17	19	47	6
Study spaces that you have access to have been sufficient for your needs	38	48	5	3	6
The technology support has been helpful	31	54	6	3	6
The online course platform or learning management system (LMS) has been user-friendly	35	52	5	3	6

Sample size = 354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.

**Appendix Table A.14. Student Survey Respondents'  
Demographic Characteristics**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Race/ethnicity <sup>a</sup>	
American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native	2
Asian	4
Black or African American	6
Hispanic or Latino	10
Middle Eastern or North African	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0
White or Caucasian	72
Multiracial	9
Another race/ethnicity not listed above	1
Don't know	0
Gender	
Man	22
Woman	73
Genderqueer	3
Another gender not listed above	0
Don't know	0
Age	
18 or younger	8
19 to 24	31
25 or older	61
Enrollment	
Full time	65
Part time	35
Either parent graduated from college	
Yes	49
No	51
Sample size	354

SOURCE: MDRC calculations using data from a student survey fielded by participating colleges. The student survey used questions from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

NOTE: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in sums and differences.  
<sup>a</sup>The question about race/ethnicity allowed students to select multiple identities.

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# ABOUT MDRC

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization, is committed to finding solutions to some of the most difficult problems facing the nation. We aim to reduce poverty and bolster economic mobility; improve early child development, public education, and pathways from high school to college completion and careers; and reduce inequities in the criminal justice system. Our partners include public agencies and school systems, nonprofit and community-based organizations, private philanthropies, and others who are creating opportunity for individuals, families, and communities.

Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

MDRC works in almost every state and all the nation's largest cities, with offices in New York City; Oakland, California; and Washington, DC.